

A 50-Year Journey from a Research Psychologist to a Regulatory Scientist

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The purpose of this post is to outline the professional, research, and intellectual movement from a research psychologist to a regulatory science. I thought it important to share this move from a very established field (psychological science) to a relatively new field (regulatory science), especially for individuals who might be interested in pursuing such a path or journey. It was not one I had intended nor planned. It just happened.

When I finished my PhD back in the 1970's, I was graduating with a whole group of other developmental psychologists who were interested in exploring children in natural settings, in this particular case, it was child care. We were all interested to see if child care would do no harm and if it didn't, did it do any good? Rather basic questions but important ones, nonetheless. Most of my fellow graduates from around the country were more interested in the micro-environments' children were in, so they focused on classrooms. I got interested in the macro version of child care focusing on the public policy level. I did not have much company when I started, and you will see not much more today although it is getting better.

I am not sure if part of the attraction to doing macro system was the fact that so few researchers were looking at this area or not; but I got immersed quickly and have never left 50 years later. And in the public policy arena, it was more specifically researching licensing and regulatory compliance. The funny thing is I can see why researchers did not get into the licensing and regulatory compliance arena because there are real limitations with licensing measurement and data analysis. But that is for later because I was too naïve at this early stage of my research career to realize that, or I might not have started the journey.

I started my career as a typical developmental psychologist securing a plum position at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro directing the Mary Elizabeth Keister Infant Demonstration Center, one of the national child care demonstration centers. It was a heady time to be in early care and education, there was a great deal of research going on all over the country and to be in the midst of it was a great deal of fun. A great deal of federal funding was supporting the research that needed to be done and many top-notch researchers were just getting started.

Because we were a demonstration center sharing with the country our vision of what high quality infant care looked like, we had individuals from all over the world visiting the center. We held regular research sessions for interested individuals and it was during one of these sessions that I was approached by Pennsylvania staff regarding a new position in their state to develop a monitoring system for Appalachian Regional Commission Child Development

Program sites. I was interested in macro-system research and this offer to design and implement such a new monitoring system sounded just too good to pass up. So, I headed north to Pennsylvania to learn more. I met with a very dynamic head of the program, and it was an easy decision to make. Just like that I switched from doing micro-system research to macro-system research and never looked back.

In designing and implementing this new monitoring system really stretched my expertise in learning the full gamut of child care administration. Knowing about early care curriculum was one aspect but knowing about funding, budgeting, and strategic planning was all new skills but were critical in keeping programs afloat and doing well. The monitoring system took on a more comprehensive approach than what I had originally envisioned. But this learning was to pay dividends later as I expanded and became responsible for more complex delivery systems.

It did not take long for other policy makers in Pennsylvania to learn about and become interested in the new ARC Monitoring System. So, after two years of development and implementation, I found myself taking my systems development skills to the Title XX Child Care Program in the Bureau of Child Development. This is when I really started my education and learning about rules/regulations/standards and how best to measure them. I also had the opportunity to team up with a pediatrician who had a keen interest in child care, Dr Susan Aronson. Sue and I became colleagues for the rest of our professional lives. It was at this point, even though I didn't know it then, that I started to make the transition from a research psychologist to a regulatory scientist. The reason I say that is because regulatory science wasn't a formal science at that point in time (later 1970's). Sue and I came up with a new monitoring system, called the Child Development Program Evaluation (CDPE) which was a state-of-the-art tool and system.

The CDPE helped to pave many avenues for future research as both a research psychologist and a regulatory scientist. It started my analyses comparing regulatory compliance and program quality. The CDPE morphed into a scale that combined both regulatory compliance indicators and quality indicators. It became the basis of discussions with the federal government regarding a national monitoring system for their Federal Interagency Day Care Requirements. It was this last activity which really cemented my transition to regulatory science.

The Feds had a monitoring dilemma. They put together a really good set of new rules and regulations for federally funded child care but did not have the resources to monitor all the standards. They needed an efficient and effective approach and in one of my visits to Washington DC sharing with them what we were doing in Pennsylvania, I shared with them the idea regarding a key indicator approach which was a methodology that was both efficient and effective at monitoring rules. They liked it and asked for me to develop the full methodology for the new Federal Interagency Day Care Requirements. And then 1980 came and the move by the federal government to block grants and the Feds were not going to monitor child care anymore but give that responsibility to the states.

This is an example of the rug being pulled out from underneath you to one of a new opportunity. Rather than having one set of rules and regulations, we needed to develop a methodology that all 50 states could utilize. To make this happen, the federal government funded us over a five-year period (1980-1985) to develop the methodologies and pilot test it in 5 states. These five states organized themselves into a Children's Services Monitoring Transfer Consortium and we set our goals on developing the respective methodologies and pilot testing their efficacy.

This was the birthplace of licensing and quality key indicators, risk assessment, and differential monitoring. These would be the first validation pilot studies to see how well these methodologies worked in the real world of child care delivery systems. It was also my entry into the political domain because with these new methodologies and differential monitoring, they were controversial especially within the licensing and regulatory administration field. Not all policy makers thought this was a good development.

In looking back on all this, I was fortunate enough in graduate school to do some pilot research in developing a regional monitoring model because I saw the need to come up with a systemic way of tracking key data elements about early care and education programs. So, in many respects, I was already thinking about all this or at least had the mindset to move in this direction.

After the pilot testing in the early 1980's, a great deal of time was spent on fine tuning the methodologies, building the algorithms, information systems, and designing the validation research studies. The University of Southern Maine was extremely helpful in getting the methodologies expanded into a more children's services arena focusing on child welfare. Unfortunately, state agencies in the child and adult residential arenas were not as interested as was the case in early care and education (child care). So, I spent my time with the early care and education community in further developing the approaches and methodologies.

It was around 1990 when ***Caring for Our Children*** was getting traction in the early care and education field, however, the American Public Health Association, Maternal and Child Health Bureau and the American Academy of Pediatrics were not pleased with the uptick. Things were moving slowly, and the reason was that the new health and safety standards were so comprehensive and detailed that it was difficult for state licensing administrators to know where to start. There needed to be an easier and more efficient way to get the standards promulgated. That's when the suggestion was made to utilize the risk assessment methodology I had developed for licensing to be applied to ***Caring for Our Children*** standards.

This is how ***Stepping Stones to Caring for Our Children*** was developed. By utilizing the risk assessment methodology and the select subcommittees that had been put in place in the creation of the health and safety standards it was a rather straightforward process. And it appeared to do the trick, once ***Stepping Stones*** was created we saw a much higher uptick with the use of the standards.

I was in the 1990's when the original monitoring system and model developed for the ARC Monitoring System really expanded into the training, technical assistance, and professional development domain. This was an exciting new development to test this new quality initiative on a large scale at the state level. The federal government was making heavy investments into the state's early care and education systems and a certain amount of funds were set aside for quality initiatives. These funds were to be used in addition to and on top of the funding for licensing. So again, my research psychologist focus swung even more over to the regulatory scientist role in looking at the most effective and efficient delivery systems on a grand scale. We moved from the micro level of designing early care and education certificate programs to full scale professional development systems at the state level.

As we continued to develop the professional development systems, we also wanted to evaluate their effectiveness and find what was working and not within these large delivery systems. Also, at the same time these systems were linked with the ongoing licensing systems being operated at the state level. It was driven by the model I had developed and refined called the ***Early Childhood Program Quality Improvement and Indicator Model (ECPQI2M)***.

It was at this point, after having done the evaluation studies that it became clear that the training of infant toddler teachers was severely lacking in the state and was in need of specific attention. I made a total change and moved from the state level to the academic level full time in establishing a research and training institute focused on infant and toddler teachers. This happened in 2000. The institute, Capital Area Early Childhood Research and Training Institute, was a community-based facility intended to focus on the needs of infant and toddler teachers. We developed a very effective mentoring program that produced positive change in the teachers' behaviors in how they interacted with infants and toddlers. The institute helped to move the needle forward for the state in providing more effective training and technical assistance and it became a demonstration site for the state in providing services.

I took what I learned here and then applied it to our human development and family studies program at the university which impacted students who were interested in early care and education positions within child care. This academic program grew tremendously and again we helped to move the needle in providing higher quality training for students entering the early care and education profession.

But my transition from research psychologist to regulatory scientist was complete after I retired from the university and established my own research institute and consulting company. It was at this point where I was finally able to focus on my research full time and not trying to fill it in around my everyday responsibilities either in public service or within academia. This is when I discovered regulatory science more fully. I did not have a clue that there was such a thing, but for good reason. Regulatory science only started to come into its own around the turn of the century and it was predominantly in the pharmaceutical arena. There was no real influence in the human services' regulatory administration area. Well, my plan was to change all that and to learn everything I could and begin applying it to the human services.

This journey took me to staying affiliated with the university in the Prevention Research Center but setting up my separate research and policy lab via the Research Institute for Key Indicators (RIKIlIc) so that I could really begin to focus on licensing measurement and monitoring systems. This was made easy with the federal government's reauthorization of the Child Care Development Block Grant in which they encouraged states to explore differential monitoring approaches. Finally, what I had proposed to the feds 40 years earlier was coming to fruition as a suggested approach to states.

I focused my energies on improving and fine-tuning the methodologies and approaches in applying the principles of regulatory science to differential monitoring, risk assessment, and licensing & quality indicators. By this point, my transformation from research psychologist to regulatory scientist was complete. It has been an interesting journey, one with many ups and downs, but one that has been very fulfilling. The research work has resulted in major improvements in child care by having more effective and efficient monitoring and licensing systems, voluntary standards for all early care and education, better decision making related to child care policy, and a better balance between regulatory compliance and program quality in the early care and education field.

If I had to start all over, I probably would take a very similar journey because of its impact on so many children and their families. Public policy is messy when it comes to research, but its potential outcomes are immense for the individuals who are impacted by the policies. I would highly recommend research psychologists to look more closely at regulatory science and see the potential outcomes. It may not get you tenure in an academic setting, but it will give you a tremendous feeling of satisfaction in being part of a non-profit organization and the impact you are having on many children and their families. Trust me, I made the transformation from research psychologist to regulatory scientist.